

**Representations of the Romance of Suhni-Mehar
in the Kalhora Tombs (1680-1783), Sindh, Pakistan**

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Abstract

Sindh, the southern-most province of Pakistan, is host to a large number of tombs that were erected during the reigns of various dynasties. The Kalhora rule (1680-1783) witnessed the unprecedented occurrence of tomb-building in Sindh. One of the most distinctive features of the Kalhora architectural decoration was the use of ceramics and wall paintings in their monuments. Wall paintings depict the social and cultural history of the Kalhoras and the tombs of both the rulers and the nobility are decorated with wall paintings.

Every 'nook and corner' of Sindh still has many storytellers who narrate tales in a rhythmic manner to amuse both the audience and themselves. In the past, their tales influenced poets and painters alike as well as many traditional romances such as those of Sasui-Punhun, Leela-Chanesar, Laila-Majnun, Umar-Marvi, Moomal-Rano, Suhni-Mehar and Sayf al Muluk wa Badri al-Jamal. The romances of Laila-Majnu and Sayf al Muluk wa Badri al Jamal 'travelled' to Sindh from Egypt through Arabic and Persian pieces of literature and were then depicted on the walls of the Kalhora tombs. Among other depicted subjects are battle scenes showing the Kalhora army crushing the enemy troops, glimpses of everyday life and representations of dance and music. Parallel depictions of folk romance are also commonly found in the Mughal, Rajput, Pahari and Deccani paintings of India.

However, this paper deals with the folk romance of Suhni-Mehar and its representation in the Kalhora tombs. Thus, the paper is divided into two parts; the first discusses the story of the folk romance of Suhni-Mehar and the second, the depicted episodes of the story in the Kalhora tombs that are located in Sindh.

Introduction

The Kalhoras ruled over the province of Sindh for more than a century (1680-1783), leaving behind a large number of funerary monuments

(Kalhoro 2010:215). These monuments are located in almost every district of Sindh. The distinctive feature of the funerary monuments is the use of ceramics and mural paintings therein (Kalhoro 2002, 2003, 2004). The tombs which are located in Upper Sindh (comprising the districts of Larkana and Dadu) are mainly adorned with paintings. Nevertheless, a few tombs are also adorned with ceramics. A few tombs which are located in the districts of Sanghar and Nawab Shah in Central Sindh are decorated with mural paintings that mainly represent folk romances. This tradition of decorating with folk-romance paintings spread from the districts of Dadu and Larkana to Nawab Shah and Sanghar. Both Larkana and Dadu were the first and second seats respectively of the Kalhora rulers who lavishly decorated their buildings in these newly-founded cities (Kalhoro 2010a; 2010b; 2010c). In this paper, I will discuss the paintings that depict the folk-romance of Suhni-Mehar which are found in the Kalhora tombs. Prior to discussing these depictions, first it is necessary to describe the story of Suhni-Mehar that is contained in the text that follows.

The Romance of Suhni-Mehar

During the reign of the Mughal Emperor, Shah Jahan (1628–1658), there was a potter by the name of Tulla who lived in Gujarat (Punjab). He had a daughter named Suhni, meaning “beautiful.” They lived by a river bank. Izzat Beg, the son of a rich Mughal merchant from Bukhara, chanced to come that way and was struck by the beauty of Suhni. He fell in love with her at first sight. Every day he came to purchase pots hoping for the opportunity of meeting Suhni, who returned his love. Spending all of his money in buying pots, Izzat Beg became penniless and asked to be employed by Suhni’s father. He was engaged as a cattleman to look after the potter’s buffaloes. He then changed his name from Izzat Beg to Mehar or ‘herdsman’ or ‘buffalo-keeper’. The love between Suhni and Mehar continued to grow, but this did not please Suhni’s parents, who forbade the lovers’ further meetings to take place. In order to clinch the matter, they married Suhni to another potter’s son who was named Dum (Khamisani 2003: 97) and they drove Mehar away.

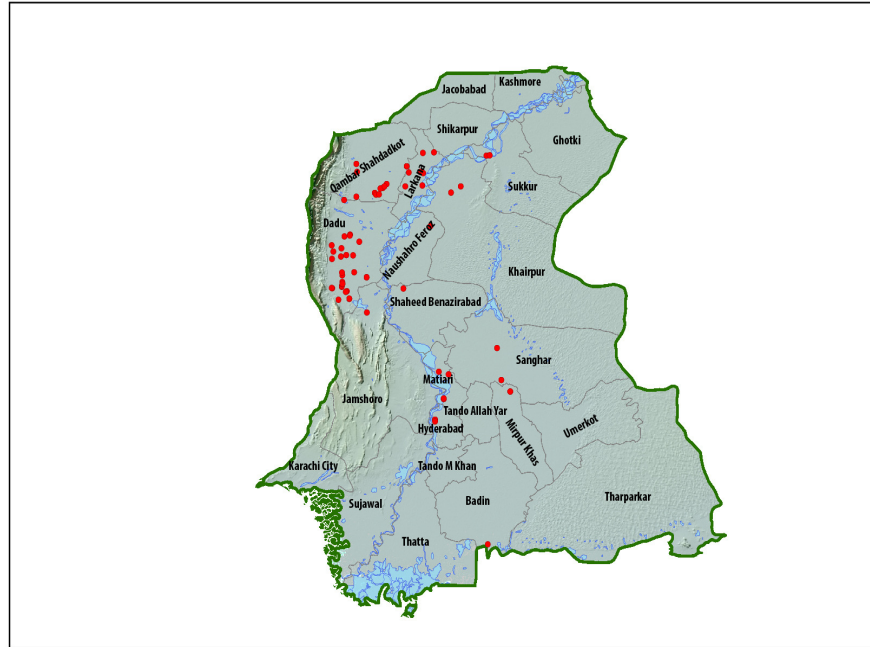


Fig. 1: The map showing the distribution of Kalhora tombs in Sindh

Mehar, however, continued to herd the buffaloes and used to graze them on the other side of the river. Every night Suhni crossed the river on a baked earthenware pot. Her parents remonstrated with her and in order to dissuade her from further meetings with Mehar, they took away the baked pot and substituted it with an unbaked one. They thought that by this device she would never dare to trust herself to the water relying on a so-fragile vessel. However, when night came, Suhni launched herself upon the river on the pot and she drowned when the water caused it to disintegrate. Mehar, who had heard her screams when the pot collapsed, rushed into the river to rescue her but also drowned, just as did the girl he loved. Mehar is fondly called Sahar (“the helper”) by Suhni (ibid:98). The following five episodes related to the above-detailed story are depicted in the Kalhora tombs that exist in several districts of Sindh:

1. Suhni’s crossing the river to meet her beloved Mehar
2. the initial meeting of Suhni and Mehar

3. Suhni making *lassi* (a beverage made from curd) for her beloved Mehar
4. Mehar grazing the buffaloes
5. A representation of the Suhni-Mehar shrine

The most frequently-depicted episodes are “The Meeting of Suhni-Mehar”, “The Grazing of the Buffaloes By Mehar”, “Suhni Making *Lassi* For Her Beloved Mehar” and “Suhni’s Crossing of the River to Meet Her Lover, Mehar”. These representations in particular can be seen in the Jamali tombs in Shahdadt, the Mian Nasir Muhammad Kalhora tombs near Garhi [Fig. 2], the Mir Allayar tombs at Drigh Bala, the Mureedani tombs at Phulji, the Rodhrani tombs at Thull, the Shahani tombs at Chhini in Dadu, the Abra tombs in Nawab Shah and the Marri tombs in Sanghar [Fig. 3].

There are two panels in the tomb of Sobdar Khan Jamali in Shahdadt which depict the Suhni-Mehar romance. On the first panel, both Suhni and Mehar are shown sitting on the cot. Both are depicted in conversation. On either side of the cot are representations of buffaloes [Fig. 4]. This is the most popular depiction found in the tombs. In order to portray the story of Suhni-Mehar, the painters featured this depiction as a ready reference to paint buffaloes along with the figures of Suhni and Mehar.

The most interesting display of Suhni and Mehar on the cot and being flanked by buffaloes is found in the tomb of Sobdar Khan Jamali. The tomb of Rehan Khan Jamali in Shahdadt also depicts the Suhni- Mehar romance. In this painting, Mehar is shown standing outside Suhni’s house along with his buffaloes and he is depicted playing a flute. Inside the house, Suhni is shown sitting, either with her mother or with a friend. This is quite an interesting painting in which the painter has captured all of the characters of the story.

The second panel in the Sobdar Jamali tomb depicts Suhni crossing the river to meet Mehar [Fig.5]. Suhni is shown floating on her baked pot in the middle of the river. On either side of Suhni are the representations of fish and crocodiles. Across the river Mehar is grazing the buffaloes and playing the flute. In front of the figures of buffaloes and Mehar is the depiction of a snake, which indicates that Mehar is grazing the buffaloes in the forest along the bank of the river.

On the bank of the river is the figure of a saintly person who is shown holding a large rosary and appears to be engaged in prayers (apparently praying for the safe crossing of the river by Suhni). A similar representation is also found in the tomb of Rehan Khan Jamali in which Mehar is depicted grazing the buffaloes and playing the flute. The main difference between these representations is Mehar's posture: in the tomb of Sobdar Khan Jamali he is shown as sitting on something, whereas in the representation in the Rehan Khan Jamali tomb he is depicted as standing, facing the river and appears to be waiting for his beloved Suhni. Another difference relates to the regard that is meted out to the saintly figure in each of the two representations. The saintly figure in Sobdar's tomb is shown wearing a green dress whereas in the Rehan Khan tomb, he is depicted wearing a black dress.

The earliest representations of Suhni Mehar are found in the tombs of Mian Nasir Muhammad Kalhoro. In the tomb of Babar Faqir, both Suhni and Mehar are shown sitting on a cot and flanked by buffaloes. This Suhni-Mehar painting appeared later in several other tombs that were erected during the reigns of Mian Noor Muhammad Kalhoro (1719-1753) and Mian Ghulam Shah Kalhoro (1757-1772). This particular painting continued to capture the attention of the painters who painted the tombs in the districts of Dadu, Larkana, Nawab Shah and Sanghar. Some additions were made to this popular depiction of Suhni and Mehar. In the earlier depictions, only the figures of Suhni and Mehar with their buffaloes were shown and, in later paintings, one finds another figure—that of a milkman who is shown milking Mehar's buffaloes.

The earliest depiction in which Suhni is shown crossing the river is found in the tomb of Mir Allahyar which was erected during the reign of Mian Noor Muhammad Kalhoro (1719-1753). On the western wall of the tomb is a large panel depicting battle scenes and the folk romance of Suhni and Mehar [Figs. 6 & 7]. There are two small panels along with a large panel. The first panel shows Suhni in the middle of the river and she is surrounded by fish and a crocodile. She is depicted as gently touching the crocodile and it does not appear to be ferocious. On the bank of the river, a saintly figure is shown as praying for the safe crossing by Suhni. Close to this is the second panel which shows

both Suhni and Mehar surrounded by buffaloes. In this depiction both are shown standing and talking with each other. Suhni is depicted holding a bowl (possibly containing *lassi*) for her beloved which she is offering to him. These two panels are the earliest ones in the necropolis of Mir Allahyar. The figures of both Suhni and Mehar themselves have long, pointed noses and almond-shaped eyes. Apart from Mir Allahyar's mausoleum, the tomb of Shadman Laghari at Muird Dero, Johi, also depicts the romance of Suhni and Mehar. This tomb was similarly erected during the reign of Mian Noor Muhammad Kalhoro. Within the arched recess on the western wall of the tomb is a painting of Suhni and Mehar. This is quite an interesting representation as Suhni is shown seeking the blessings of an ascetic prior to entering and crossing the river to meet her beloved Mehar who is depicted as grazing the buffaloes on the other side of the river. Interestingly, there is the figure of a horse rider close behind the 'Suhni' figure and it appears to be that of her fiancé, Dum, who is shown to be chasing her. This is possibly the only representation of the Suhni-Mehar romance in which Suhni's fiancé, Dum, is also shown. Again the distinctive feature of the painting is the long, pointed noses of the figures. The colours of the painting have faded due to their exposure to rainwater and sunlight. The dome of the tomb has caved in, thereby exposing the murals to sunlight. On the other hand, an ascetic is depicted in the representation of the Suhni-Mehar romance in the tomb of Shadman Laghari. The ascetic or *Dervish* is shown wearing only a cap and a loincloth with a parrot sitting on his right shoulder. The earlier depictions, which I have described above represent a saintly person with a rosary and wearing either a black or green-coloured dress.

Some 3 km east of Murid Dero, where the tomb of Shadman is located, are a few tombs at Herio Khan Village that belong to the Laghari and Babar tribes respectively. There are two tombs of the Laghari tribe which lie half a kilometre west of Herio Khan Village and the tombs of the Babar tribe are located 2 km west of Herio Khan Village. All of these tombs depict the Suhni-Mehar and Sasui-Punhun romances. The tomb of Dost Ali Laghari depicts the romance of Suhni and Mehar by showing them sitting on a cot. On the left side of the cot are representations of buffaloes and on the right is the figure of either a friend of Suhni or an attendant who is holding a hand-fan. This is an

interesting painting in the sense that it also contains the figure of an attendant, which was not seen in the tombs discussed above. Suhni is shown offering her beloved a glass of *lassi*. A similar depiction of Suhni and Mehar is found in the tombs of Babar, which lie 2 km west of Herio Khan Village. In one of the tombs there are two panels which show Suhni and Mehar on a cot, with the buffaloes painted on separate panels. In one of the panels Suhni and Mehar are both shown seated on a cot with an attendant holding a hand fan on the left side. The second panel is divided into two smaller panels with the left one depicting the buffaloes and the right one showing Suhni and Mehar on the cot. Unfortunately, all of these representations have been damaged by the seepage of rainwater that entered through the cracks on the dome of the tomb. Several other representations, such as hunting and battle scenes, peacock paintings and the romances of Sasui-Punhun and Laila-Majnun, have also been damaged by the seepage of rainwater.

Apart from the paintings in the tombs of the Laghari and Babar tribes, one finds some refined representations of the Suhni-Mehar romance in the Mureedani Jamali tombs, which are located 5 km west of Herio Khan Village. There are three tombs in the necropolis that represent the romance of Suhni and Mehar as well as that of Sausi and Punhun. The tomb of Datal Jamali bears some representations of Suhni and Mehar [Fig. 8]. One of the panels shows Suhni and Mehar on the cot and on either side of it are the figures of buffaloes. It appears that this painting was made during the last days of the Kalhora rule, most probably during the reign of Mian Abdul Nabi (1776-1783) because the figures that are shown are quite different from the earlier representations found in the tombs of Mian Nasir Muhammad, Shadman Laghari at Murid Dero and Mir Allahyar at Drigh Bala. All of the earlier representations of Suhni and Mehar depicted them as having had prominent facial features, such as long, pointed noses and almond-shaped eyes. But the later representations of Suhni and Mehar lacked such style: in these figures, one finds that a more simple treatment has been meted out to the figures. However, the figures do have pointed noses, but not as long as those seen in the earlier depictions. The eyes are almost round-shaped as compared to the almond shape that prevails in the earlier representations. Moreover, the colour of the buffaloes is not black but rather blue, brown and white. This indicates that the art of

painting lacked patronship in the waning days of the Kalhoras and did not receive patronship in the succeeding dynasty of the Talpurs. However, two tombs behind Datal Khan's tomb are earlier structures that were possibly erected during the reigns of Mian Noor Muhammad or Mian Ghulam Shah. The paintings in these tombs are rather refined and correspond to the earlier style of murals which was patronized by Mian Yar Muhammad Kalhoro (1700-1718) and Mian Noor Muhammad Kalhoro (1719-1753).

One of the tombs, west of Datal Khan's tomb in the necropolis of Mureedani Jamali, depicts the Suhni-Mehar romance. There is a single panel that bears Suhni crossing the river to meet her beloved Mehar [Fig. 9]. As seen in several similar depictions, Mehar is shown grazing the buffaloes on the river bank. Interestingly enough, there is no image of a saintly figure as seen in several other depictions. Suhni is surrounded by fish and a crocodile that appears to devour her clay pot. This is apparently depicted to show that Suhni is in trouble and that is why one does not find the saintly figure which is depicted praying for Suhni's safe crossing of river. In this depiction, both Suhni and Mehar are depicted in red- coloured dress.

Another tomb that is nearby also depicts Suhni and Mehar. Both are shown sitting on the cot and surrounded by the buffaloes. Mehar's sword and shot gun (lying under the cot) are also shown in this representation. Above both figures, is the picture of a parrot; the parrot is a symbol of love when used in these rural folktale paintings.

Located approximately 8 km south of the Mureedani Jamali tombs are the mausoleums of the Qalandarani Lagharis. There are six tombs of which one depicts the Suhni-Mehar romance. Suhni is depicted as crossing the river and, in this depiction; a saintly figure is added (which was missing in the Jamali tomb in the necropolis of Mureedani Jamali). The saintly figure is holding a rosary in his hand [Fig. 10] and he is depicted as wearing a green-coloured dress. Suhni is also dressed in green, whereas Mehar is dressed in white, though he is wearing a green cap and belt. Also noteworthy is that the buffaloes are painted grey as compared to earlier representations in which they were in black and brown in colour.

In some depictions of the romance of Suhni and Mehar, a saintly figure is present while in others the figure is absent. There is a

Suhni-Mehar depiction in one of the Abra tombs at Muhammad Khan Vighio Village in the Nawab Shah district in which the saintly figure is also absent. However, Suhni is shown crossing the river and interestingly enough, the buffaloes are also shown as being in the river as well as on both banks of the river. Fish and crocodiles (three of them) are present in this painting. Usually, one finds a single crocodile in the Suhni-Mehar representations. This is the only depiction in which there are three crocodiles which are shown as attacking Suhni. One crocodile has caught her head and another has held her from the leg. The absence of the saintly figure indicates that Suhni is in trouble and that she is being attacked and devoured by the crocodiles.

The tomb of Sultan Marri at the Tilla Shah necropolis in the district of Sanghar displays a similar painting of Suhni and Mehar [Fig. 11]. In this depiction the saintly figure, possibly Khawja Khizar, the water saint who protects his devotees from trouble and misfortune, is present and he is shown as sitting on the fish. The figure appears very clear and defined in this depiction along with a pair of fish under his feet. Furthermore, he is depicted as reciting from a holy book. The earlier representations showed him as seated under a tree facing the river and holding a rosary, with no clear indication of any fish as his vehicle or mount. He is depicted in a green dress with a white turban and in front of this bearded figure (Khawja Khizar) are his green walking-stick and a water flask. On the other side of the bank Mehar is shown as seated under a tree playing the flute and he is depicted as wearing a yellow-coloured dress. In the middle of the river is the figure of Suhni surrounded by fish, crocodiles and the buffaloes. Unfortunately, this painting has been damaged by rainwater that has seeped in from cracks on the dome. Due to this seepage, sludge appears on the figures of Khawja Khizar and Mehar. This particular depiction of the Suhni-Mehar romance continues to appear in several tombs in the Dadu district.

Apart from these two episodes from the story of Suhni and Mehar, there is another episode that often appears in the tombs. This episode shows Suhni preparing *lassi* for her beloved Mehar. In some of the tombs, she is shown churning the milk while Mehar is depicted as milking the buffaloes.

The tomb of Ghazi Khan at Ghebi Dero depicts Suhni churning the milk while Mehar is busy in milking the buffaloes. The parrot (as a lovebird) is depicted with Suhni in every representation. This lovebird is shown as sitting on top of the churning stick [Fig. 12]. A similar scene of Suhni preparing *lassi* for her beloved Mehar is found in the tomb of Mir Muhammad at Rais Bambho Khan Village. There is a single panel in which three stories have been painted. At the top is a depiction of the romance of Sasui and Punhun, on the left is a painting showing a paddy-cultivation activity and on the right is the depiction of Suhni and Mehar. She is depicted as churning the milk and behind her is the figure of Mehar seated on a cot. Buffaloes are also shown in front of the figure of Suhni. A calf is tethered to a peg while the parent buffalo is standing close to its calf. The parrot is again shown seated on top of Suhni's churning stick.

Another episode from the story is the representation of Mehar as a buffalo-herder. He is shown as grazing the buffaloes and playing the flute. This painting is found in a few tombs in the Larkana and Dadu districts. In the tomb of Mir Muhammad, one finds the painting of Mehar in which he is shown as grazing buffaloes and playing the flute. Above him is the painting of a hunter who is hunting deer. A few depictions of Mehar as a buffalo-herder are also found in the tombs of Mian Nasir Muhammad Kalhoro.

The last episode of the Suhni-Mehar story is also painted in some tombs. This final episode shows both Suhni and Mehar as dead, after having drowned in the river, with their ultimate union taking place in their simultaneous death. The painters have depicted the final episode of the story in the form of the shrine of Suhni and Mehar [Fig. 13]. There is a large panel depicting three episodes of the Suhni-Mehar romance in the tomb of Lahno Khan at Rasis Bambho Khan in the district of Larkana. The first episode shows Suhni crossing the river and the second shows the meeting of the two lovers who are depicted as sitting on a cot with buffaloes surrounding them. The third episode shows the 'shrine' belonging to Suhni and Mehar that shows Suhni as screaming and drowning while Mehar, on hearing the screams of his beloved, jumps into the river in an attempt to save her but, in the end, both are drowned. The painter depicted the final episode by painting their tomb/shrine as a representation indicating that they both died and

met in death. The tomb of Lahno Khan was built during the Kalhora reign. There are two graves in the tomb, belonging to Lahno Khan and Tharo Khan respectively. The depiction of the Suhni-Mehar's shrine is only peculiar to the tomb of Lahno Khan and is not found in any other mausoleum in Sindh. As discussed above, the Suhni-Mehar 'shrine' has been painted between two different episodes of the Suhni-Mehar romance. On the left of the shrine is the depiction of Suhni and Mehar seated on a cot that is surrounded by buffaloes. On the right is the representation of Suhni crossing the river to meet her beloved Mehar. In between these two depictions is the representation of Suhni-Mehar's shrine with buffaloes standing on the right side, in a submissive posture.

Conclusion

The Kalhora tombs depict folk romances of not only Suhni and Mehar but also those of Sasui and Punhun, Leela and Chanesar, Laila and Majnun Moomal and Rano, Umar and Marvi and Nuri and Jam Tamachi. However, the mural paintings of the folktale associated with Suhni and Mehar are a distinctly common visual feature in every 'nook and corner' of Sindh wherever the Kalhora tombs are located. This reflects the liberal attitude held by the Kalhora rulers who patronized the art of creating paintings. Moreover, the various episodes that depict the Suhni-Mehar story are important to note for the purpose of understanding the role played by such stories in the Medieval and Post-Medieval Periods in the province of Sindh. These stories never failed to capture the minds and hearts of both painters and poets who expressed their feelings in the forms of painting and poetry respectively. These 'romance paintings' continued to be produced even after the Kalhora Dynasty was supplanted by the Talpurs, but these were rather immature representations as compared to the earlier paintings made by the Kalhora painters. Secondly, the sepulchral architecture did not develop as vigorously because it did not receive a similar popularity as it had during the Kalhora rule. In fact, the Talpur architecture was simply an extension of the Kalhora architecture and it did not form a distinctive style that can be termed as a 'Talpur style'. Rather, it can be categorized as the 'later Kalhora architecture'. Furthermore, the Talpur-Period buildings (1783-1843) lacked that robustness that was reflected in the Kalhora structures (1680-1783).

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Fig.2 Dadu: The tombs of Mian Nasir Muhammad Kalhoro at Garhi.



Fig. 3 Sanghar: Kalhora tombs at Tilla Shah necropolis.



Fig.4 Larkana: Representation of Suhni-Mehar showing them on the cot in the tomb of Mir Sobdar Jamali.



Fig.5 Larkana: Suhni swims to meet her lover Mehar, in the tomb of Mir Sobdar Jamali.



Fig.6 Dadu: The tomb of Mir Allahyar.



Fig.7 Dadu: Representation of Suhni-Mehar, surrounded by buffaloes, in the tomb of Mir Allahyar.



Fig. 8 Dadu: Painting of Suhni-Mehar in the tomb of Datal Jamali.



Fig. 9 Dadu: Painting of Suhni-Mehar in an unidentified tomb at the necropolis of Mureedani Jamali.

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Fig. 10 Dadu: Depiction of Suhni crossing the river to meet Mehar, a saintly figure is also seen in the painting.



Fig. 11 Sanghar: Painting of Sohni-Mehar in the tomb of Sultan Marri at Tilla Shah Necropolis



Fig. 12 Larkana: Suhni is shown preparing *lassi* for Mehar, in the tomb of Ghazi Khan.



Fig.13 Larkana: Representation of Suhni-Mehar's shrine in the tomb of Lahno Khan.